

Connectedness, Conspiracy and Control: the Denver Airport Conspiracy and Suspicion in the
Digital Age

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by

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The conspiracy theory takes many different forms through many different media, and ranges in content as esoteric as the belief that the world's most powerful figures come from a race of alien reptilian humanoids (Ronson 2001), to as generally accepted as the idea that corporation heads and political leaders have more influence over world events than the average person could know about. While conspiracy theories have existed since long before the Internet, this paper will examine the form they have taken in the digital age, and specifically in the present state of the Internet, which is defined by its inclusion of user-generated content. Political theorist Michael Barkun describes the contemporary phenomenon of "superconspiracies," which connect several conspiracy belief systems together. I will be examining a particular superconspiracy, concerning the Denver International Airport, as well as the anxieties of the digital age. I will use this information to explain how conspiracy theories are transmitted online, how interest in conspiracy and the formation of superconspiracies relate to common digital age suspicions, and how the current form of the Internet parallels the form of superconspiracies, in such a way to make the superconspiracy a reflection of the anxieties of digital age consciousness.

Barkun says that "the common thread of conspiricism [is] the belief that powerful, hidden evil forces control human destinies" (Barkun 2, 2006), succinctly explaining the plot of contemporary conspiracy narratives that are propagated online, which attempt to expose the hidden forces that control world events. He identifies three types of conspiracy theories, which include: "event conspiracies" in which a conspiracy group is responsible for a single event, "system conspiracies, where an evil organization attacks another institution, and "superconspiracies, in which multiple conspiracies are linked together hierarchically...in complex ways, so that conspiracies become nested within one another." (Barkun 6, 2006) "Superconspiracies have enjoyed particular growth since the 1980s" (Barkun 6, 2006), during

which time the Internet has grown as a new medium. Barkun calls conspiracy ideas “stigmatized” knowledge, or knowledge that is not accepted by the dominant culture. He claims that subcultures dominated by belief of stigmatized knowledge “are most likely to nurture conspiracy ...and are precisely the kind of subcultures most attracted to the Internet” (Barkun 12, 2006).

A famous example of the mass dissemination of contemporary conspiracy ideas online is the September 11th skepticism spread by the independently-produced documentary, *Loose Change*¹ which is free to view on YouTube and Google Video (Pilkington 2007). Barkun claims “conspiracy enthusiasts find in the Internet virtual communities of the like-minded,” who are attracted to “the absence of gatekeepers [online] who might censor the content of messages” (Barkun 13, 2006). In addition, he claims that online “repetition [of a conspiracy narrative] substitutes for direct evidence as a way of determining veracity” (2006), which could explain *Loose Change*’s contribution to the statistic that in 2007 “more than a third of Americans believe[d] that either the official version [of 9/11] never happened, or that US officials knew the attacks were imminent, but did nothing to stop them” (Pilkington 2007).

In this way, Barkun’s assumptions about conspiracy ideas on the Internet explain the success of *Loose Change*, as the lack of gatekeepers allowed it to be disseminated on a large scale and its popularity served to pique the repeated interest that Barkun claims “substitutes for veracity.” However, while he stresses the “absence of gatekeepers” in the appeal of transmitting conspiracy theories online, because they would not be accepted in “conventional mass media,” conspiracy theorists argue that this “absence of gatekeepers” is exactly the reason the secret information of the conspiracy is able to be published without censorship or consequence. Many media critics, like Olia Lialina, argue that the Internet is far from an esoteric medium. In her

article “A Vernacular Web 2” in 2009, Olia Lialina claims that the Internet is “the most mass medium of them all”(Lialina 59, 2007). Likewise, as the Internet becomes more like a mass medium, in the sense that it delivers content to masses of people, what Barkun refers to as “stigmatized knowledge” might not gain veracity, but rather vernacular authority. as Conspiracy theory content is linked, repeated, and tagged online, blending its association with both institutional and vernacular sources and snowballing in pervasiveness, regardless of whether or not the viewers and transmitters of conspiracy knowledge claim to believe it or claim that it is true. While Barkun explains conspiracy theorists’ content on the Internet as an echo chamber for “like-minded individuals”(Barkun 13, 2006) to express their esoteric beliefs, it is much more complicated, as conspiracy theory content is posted, tagged and blogged in places ranging from humor sites, social networking sites, forums, personal blogs, and even sites sponsored by the conventional mass media. Conspiracy theory content, which may once have been limited to esoteric circles, finds itself disseminated in a wider cultural sphere on the Internet, specifically in Web 2.0, where users contribute content, and where anonymity removes users’ hesitation to post stigmatized content.

The Denver International Airport conspiracy is a superconspiracy that developed during the rise of the Internet as a medium of user-generated content, and continues to grow. The basic plot of the conspiracy narrative surrounding the Denver International Airport includes the belief that underneath the airport is a massive tunnel system which will serve as a bunker for the elite population of 500 million people chosen to survive after a planned genocide in 2012, put in action by the New World Order (Maher 2009). A main focus in conspiracy theorists’ alleged proof of this plot is a symbolic interpretation of artist Leo Tanguma’s murals in the airport, which claims that the content of the murals depicts the genocidal events to come, along with

suspicion about the airport's large size and other claims about its construction, like that "barren acres of fenced lots... have barbed wire along their tops - pointing in" (Anomalies-Unlimited 2005). Jared Maher is the author of the "DIA Conspiracy Files," a collection of activity concerning the conspiracy, although Maher is not himself a conspiracy theorist, rather an archivist of conspiracy content. In 2009 he explains that:

"Conspiracy theorists have been looking into the Denver International Airport since before it opened in 1994. But the theories didn't take off among the masses until about four years ago. That was when the website "Anomalies- Unlimited" posted a series of detailed pages devoted to the mysteries of DIA. Since then, [these] pages have been the most widely referenced and top Google result holder for the DIA conspiracy." (Maher 2009)

Jared Maher cites the "Anomalies," author's goal in writing the original DIA post as to "plant the seed that something's not right at DIA" (Maher 2009), (Anomalies-Unlimited 2005). This seed was the beginning of the Denver International Airport conspiracy's mass proliferation online, growing into countless blog posts and coverage by many other sites dedicated to conspiracy belief, including the Vigilant Citizen², a site which locates occult symbolism in public sites, including the Bank of America, the Georgia Guidestones, and the Los Angeles Central Library, with the intention of revealing a secret agenda of mind control through the mass media (Vigilant Citizen 2008). The Vigilant Citizen directs readers to the two-part YouTube documentary, "Denver Airport Conspiracy Theory: A Documentary,"³ "for additional sources of information or theories" (Vigilant Citizen 2008). This documentary, has over two million views since 2008, clearly mimics the famous YouTube documentary, *Loose Change*, using the same filming technique of panning across screenshots of documents and photographs, while an unseen

narrator explains their significance (Candlelight Films 2008). Since the Anomalies author planted “the seed that something’s not right at the DIA,” the repeated linkage and repetition of the conspiracy through many different sites has caused it to grow to include a complex web of components, such as the idea that Queen Elizabeth was buying up land around the airport (Maher 2009) and the idea that a deadly strain of Hepatitis that will be used to commit the mass genocide, as introduced in “Denver International Airport Conspiracy Theory: A Documentary” (Candlelight Films 2008). This growth is caused by the nurturing of the conspiracy by Internet users that Barkun predicted, and is an example of how the complex linkage between one conspiracy, like that concerning the DIA, and other related conspiracy theories, can quickly become a hierarchical superconspiracy complex when transmitted online.

The widespread popularity of the Denver International Airport Conspiracy and *Loose Change* online is contrary to Barkun’s view of conspiracy theorists’ activity online as an echo chamber, perhaps because constant linkage and discussion on sites like YouTube function both as a forum for devoted subcultures and as a medium to deliver content to the masses. To explain how online media can serve both as a vernacular forum and as a mass medium for conspiracy theory content, we must examine the current state of the Web, and concerns of Web users. “The arrival and rapid dissemination of digital technology in the last decades of the twentieth century” has been described as “a singularity, an event which changes things so fundamentally that there is absolutely no going back” (Prensky 1, 2001). The current state of this technology is referred to as Web 2.0.

Idealistically, Web 2.0 represents an era of user-generated content, and the rhetoric surrounding it emphasizes the “new digital democracy” it has created. Among this rhetoric is Time Magazine’s naming “You”⁴ the person of the year in 2006 (Grossman 2006). This article

claims that Web 2.0 offers “community and collaboration on a scale never seen before” and that “it's about the cosmic compendium of knowledge Wikipedia, the million-channel people's network YouTube and the online metropolis MySpace” (Grossman 2006). Sites like YouTube, Facebook and Twitter give users the freedom and convenience to share content on the Web and to access the content of others. Users have more opportunities than ever before to share content with a mass audience, and viewers have more options concerning what content to consume. Since Web 2.0 emphasizes “you,” users have the opportunity to personalize their pages and to share personal information with others. Social networking sites like Facebook allow users to make catalogues of their lives, which are broadcast to the newsfeeds of their friends and family, inviting the observation of their every activity by the people they would like to stay connected with.

However, while Time Magazine optimistically celebrated “You” as the author of content in Web 2.0, what they exclude is the fact that “You” are the content of Web 2.0. When users answer Facebook’s prompt of “What’s on your mind?” or update followers of the content of their day on Twitter, they are publishing content about themselves. It is completely normalized for users of these social networking mediums to consent to posting their information online to connect with people, for validation and to express themselves. However, the price for accessing these sites is personal information used for [contextual advertising](#), in which information a user puts in to a website, whether it is the content of their Facebook profile or even what they search for on Google, is used to deliver targeted ads to their page (Knopf 2009), and is the reason critics like Dennis Knopf claim Web 2.0 is “less about a “new digital democracy” and more about converting desire to express uniqueness and personal information online to an intelligent marketing system” (Knopf 2009).

The data collection involved in this “intelligent marketing” is often visible to users. For example, Amazon.com offers customers who sign in with an Amazon account personalized recommendations based on their previous purchases. Amazon refers to these as “recommendations,” implying that they are a service to help users, rather than intelligent advertisements. In addition, Amazon says users can “improve their recommendations” by rating the products they have bought. This benefits customers by providing them with recommendations that cater more closely to their tastes, but even more so it benefits Amazon.com, by providing them with free market research statistics. Amazon users continue to sell themselves as consumers for the benefit of products that cater to their interests.

Other sites do this sort of market research in a way that is less visible and not always noticed by the user. However, when this research is discovered by users, one can expect discomfort and anxiety about surveillance. Facebook extracts information from users’ profile information about their interests, their location, their age and gender and uses it to select better targeted advertisements for the side of their page. It is not uncommon for users to find ads that directly refer to a band or movie that they mentioned in their interests.

For example, one user’s status shows him becoming aware of the way Facebook selects the advertisements he sees.⁵ He suspects that Facebook “looks at your pictures” because he sees ads for JDate (a Jewish dating site) and because he received an ad on the side of his page advertising Wes Anderson art when his profile picture was a picture of Bill Murray (who is in many Wes Anderson films). To select these ads, this user claims, Facebook must have “looked” at his pictures to recognize that he is Jewish and that his profile picture was Bill Murray.

To some degree, this user's suspicions are not far from technology that Facebook has developed. An article on the PC World blog outlines the controversy behind Facebook's use of facial recognition software without notifying users. Using biometric image maps, Facebook is able to "see," as the suspicious user with a Bill Murray profile picture put it, who or what is represented in the images people post. In 2011 Facebook was implementing this technology to tag people in photos automatically. Due to complaints, Facebook is no longer implementing facial image mapping (Oswald 2011), but the implications of this technology remain present in Facebook user's anxieties about privacy.⁶

Other anxieties about privacy in Web 2.0 concern the blurring of the lines between public and private information. Narratives about public humiliation and job discrimination based on the content of one's personal blog or Facebook profile circulate frequently, a famous example of which being that of Heather Armstrong⁷, author of the blog, dooce.com. Armstrong was fired from her job as a web designer because she "had written stories that included people in [her] workplace" on her blog, even though she "had never mentioned the company or any employee by name" (Armstrong 2002). Though dooce.com cost Armstrong her job, her witty content gained her Internet fame, and the term doocing, or "to lose one's job because of one's website" (Urban Dictionary 2004), is named after her.⁸

While the doocing of Heather Armstrong is the most famous example of a narrative describing the loss of one's job due to content on a personal website, there are countless examples of people who suffered professional loss because of pictures they posted on Facebook. For example, Stacey Snyder's teaching degree was rescinded days before her graduation because she posted a picture of herself with the caption "drunk pirate" (Tyan 2008)⁹, and Ashley Payne, a high school teacher who was featured in the CBS special "Did the Internet Kill Privacy?" after

she was forced to resign for posting a picture of herself on vacation holding a glass of wine and a glass of beer (Moriarty 2011)¹⁰. These stories on the news and on Dooce.com, serve as cautionary tales about sharing personal content online and bring criticism of Facebook's privacy settings, which have been reportedly changed without user's notice (Newman 2009), as well as conversation about first amendment rights when personal content can be surveilled.

One CNN report asks young people in the job market how their reactions to a "Microsoft survey [that] found that 79 percent of U.S. hiring managers [use] the Internet to better assess applicants" (Goldberg 2010). The respondents said they feared losing their jobs even if there was nothing bad on their profiles. One woman said, "Not everything is certain. If my employers saw something on my profile now that they didn't like, they could take my job away." Despite cautionary tales about doocing and Facebook's troublesome privacy settings, many users are hesitant to remove online content because sites like Facebook are significant to their personal lives. One woman, fearing her employer's surveillance of pictures of her and her friends in college, says "they're my memories and I want to keep them for now" (Goldberg 2010).

However, Google's new privacy policy has fostered increased concern about privacy in Web 2.0. This policy, which took effect on March 1, 2012, not only collects data from users when they use Google products like search, Gmail, Google+, and YouTube, but also shares this data across these sites, and does not provide the opportunity for users to "opt out" of this surveillance (The Daily What 2012). By connecting users' access across these sites contextual advertising is informed across all Google products (which the dominate majority of many user's activities online), and affects the search results that users receive based on the content they accessed across all the sites owned by Google. Google has marketed the changes as a "more intuitive experience," which better "understands" users (Whitten 2012). An example of this

more intuitive “understanding” of users, provided by the video explaining the policy changes on Google’s official blog, describes a scenario in which Google can “tell you when you’ll be late for a meeting, based on your [GPS] location, your calendar, and local traffic conditions” (Whitten 2012). This video constantly reminds users of advantages of the sharing of their data, including the “simplification” of both the privacy policy and their experience. Despite its branding as service to simplify user’s experience, this new privacy policy has brought the issue of data collection as a violation of user’s privacy into the public eye more than ever, especially as users can no longer choose not to have their online activity, and even their GPS location tracked. Google’s privacy channel on YouTube has fostered ongoing debate about the implications of this tracking since January 2012.

This new privacy policy has led to user’s increased awareness and increased discomfort with the tracking of their online activity. Some users have expressed concerns about how their experience will actually be limited by Google’s “reinforcing existing biases.”¹¹ While Google’s modification of search results to tailor to users interests is marketed as a convenience, it essentially censors the information users can find a search by their previous history, limiting the information they can easily access. Users in the comments of The Daily What’s coverage of the policy change joked about the level of control Google now has over users’ experiences, comparing it to Big Brother, while others expressed their disappointment in Google for being as intrusive as Facebook.¹²

Apprehension to sites like Google and Facebook by once-optimistic Web 2.0 users represents growing fears that the ease of connectedness that comes with new communication technology has gone too far, and now threatens their privacy and ultimately their freedom. Users have both the privilege of sharing personal content with online friends and peers, and the

responsibility and liability of having their lives published. In this way Web 2.0 represents less the “new digital democracy” expected by Time Magazine and more the oppressive feeling of surveillance that comes with the “freedom” to publish oneself.

While Web 2.0 users now find themselves without the option to avoid surveillance by the unseen entities that control their access to sites online, they express more and more anxiety about the connectedness they are involved in, and while conspiracy theorists map the hidden connections that link organizations and world events, Google now maps the connections between individual users in the statistics they compile of their online activities. The increased connectedness that Google offers in Web 2.0 brings users together under one seemingly utopian system where they can easily access content tailored to their individual interests, but with the consequence of constant surveillance. In this way, Web 2.0 paradoxically represents the freedom of users to access information and connect with others as well as user’s vulnerability to the unseen forces in control of their information.

At the 2012 *Webstock* conference in New Zealand, Danah Boyd mentioned this paradox in her presentation, “Power and Fear in Networked Publics,” specifically in her analysis of the ideology of radical transparency. Radical transparency is “the notion that putting everything out in the open will make people more honest” (Boyd 2012), which emerged from efforts towards corporate accountability, to make corporations more “honest.” This idea of radical transparency has been embraced by the social media community, largely to encourage transparency from those in power. However, those in power have used the same strategies to impose radical transparency on to users. Boyd cites Mark Zuckerberg’s “belief in radical transparency” as a cause for Facebook’s controversial privacy settings, saying he “has argued that people are more

accountable if they don't hide behind pseudonyms and privacy settings" (Boyd 2012). Boyd explains the controversial privacy changes as something like a "public outing" of users

She cites the use of crowdsourcing to identify rioters and protesters in a photograph as a clearer example of those in power using the transparency available in Web 2.0 to impose certain morals on to individuals (Boyd 2012). In some ways, the paradox of ease of connectedness at the cost of surveillance that Web 2.0 users face is part of the imposition of this utopian ideal of "radical transparency" to enforce moral behavior by those in power. While proponents of radical transparency may have the moral interests of a more "honest" society in mind, the forced "outing" of users by those in power represents a complete violation of privacy with the risk of negative consequences for individuals and of oppression on a larger scale.

A similar paradox is seen in the conspiracy theorists' reading of Leo Tanguma's murals in the Denver International Airport as apocalyptic premonitions, because they depict both mass oppression and utopian connectedness. The two diptych murals, "Children of the World Dream of Peace"¹³ and "In Peace and Harmony with Nature," show what could be considered a scene of social injustice on one wall, and a utopian overcoming of this injustice on the other. "Children of the World Dream of Peace" is no longer on display at the DIA, but the Anomalies-Unlimited site provides what they claim was the airport's description of this diptych, before it, and the mural, were removed, which said:

"The Children of the World Dream of Peace" is a powerful mural expressing the artist's desire to abolish violence in society. One part of the diptych exhibits the tragedy and devastation of war and its impact on humanity. The mural then moves to images of

smiling children dressed in folk costumes from around the world celebrating peace prevailing over war” (Anomalies-Unlimited 2009).

While the airport’s description implies that the second wall shows people of all nationalities coming together and triumphing over the evils of war, the conspiracy theorists’ reading, as expressed in The Vigilant Citizen’s post about the DIA, reads the wall depicting people from all different nations first, and the wall with the military figure and mothers with dead children second. In this reading, the wall with the rainbow and multicultural unity represents “countries of the world giving up their military might and their national identity for “the common good”,” which they claim is a reference to “a New World order, with one government and one army,” (Vigilant Citizen 2008). This New World Order, consisting of 500 million people from all over the world, are, according to the conspiracy theory, the select population that the Denver International Airport will protect in the planned genocide, who will unite in a One World Government, which will execute the genocide using toxic gas (Vigilant Citizen 2008, 2010). In this reading of the mural, the wall with the military figure represents this genocide, which the Vigilant Citizen calls a “new holocaust,” drawing both from the German boy’s position in the center of the wall with the rainbow, and depiction of a letter from Auschwitz, depicted on the wall with the military figure, which they say alludes to the use of gas to commit the genocide (Vigilant Citizen 2008).

While, according to the airport’s description, “Children of the World Dream of Peace” represents Tanguma’s utopian vision of people from all over the world coming together to triumph over war and violence, it is viewed by conspiracy theorists like the Vigilant Citizen to represent the similarly utopian New World Order, in which people of the world are brought together in a mass genocide, both on the part of the elite 500 million to be “saved” and those who

are murdered in the genocide. This concept of unification of all nations in the New World Order can be compared to the seemingly utopian promise of Web 2.0 to connect people from all over the world, sharing all information under the ethic of radical transparency. Since the one-world government is seen by conspiracy theorists as a destructive force, we can see their position on global connectedness is closer to those who would like to have privacy online than the goals of corporations like Google, which seek to share users' information openly.

In *The End of the World as We Know It*, Daniel Wojcik writes that "The endtimes that occur prior to nuclear apocalypse and Christ's return are envisioned by prophecy enthusiasts as times of oppression, suffering, and apparent triumph of evil over good (Wojcik 33, 1999), which is exactly what Leo Tanguma represents in one wall of each of his murals. For "Children of the World Dream of Peace," the panel depicting a gas-masked military figure, violating the dove of peace while a line of mothers weep for the loss of their dead children shows this oppression, suffering and triumph of evil over good, followed by the wall in which people from around the world join together to beat the sword into a ploughshare and overcome this violence. For "In Peace and Harmony with Nature,"¹⁴ one wall shows "multicultural children...shocked and saddened at finding our natural world in a trampled and abused state" (Tanguma 2011), represented by plants and animals endangered by the technology of man, such as a harpooned whale and a sea turtle in a net, while a rainforest burns in the foreground and a city burns in the background. This state of suffering and injustice is countered by the second wall, where the multicultural children celebrate the earth and watch as a "unique flowering plant" (Tanguma 2011) is placed in the soil. Though Tanguma does not claim in his artist statements to represent anything about nuclear or religious apocalypse, or the apocalypse by biological weapons that conspiracy theorists find in his murals, his murals provide the imagery of mass suffering,

destruction, and injustice that Wojcik says are believed to precede the apocalypse and which provide the basis for what conspiracy theorists' see as a narrative of the coming apocalypse.

In this way, Tanguma's artist statements show that his work does not intend to cryptically reveal the events of a coming apocalypse in the literal sense that conspiracy theorists purport, but that he does successfully provide the endtimes imagery that Wojcik ascribes to narratives of both nuclear and religious apocalypses. The difference between Tanguma's artist statements and what conspiracy theorists read in to this imagery is in the chronology, because conspiracy theorists read the diptychs in reverse order, with the unification of people first and the suffering second. Tanguma intends to show the mass oppression and suffering in the past and present, followed by idealistic triumph over this suffering in the future, while conspiracy theorists see all of the murals in the future, as part of a systematic plot to cause suffering. Even explicit references to past events in the murals, like the letter from Auschwitz, are seen by conspiracy theorists as allusions, not to the horrors of the holocaust, but to a future comparable to a "new holocaust" (Vigilant Citizen 2008). While Tanguma does not accept conspiracy ideas that his murals are "prophetic," he does refer to them as "painted sermons" or "pictorial admonishments about injustices in society" (Tanguma 2011). By showing the injustices of the past and present, followed by idealistic unity and triumph over the evils of man, he does not predict a future of suffering, but a utopian future where the suffering of the present has been overcome.

Conspiracy theorists and other sources commenting on the cultural phenomenon of the Denver International Airport Conspiracy point to Leo Tanguma's murals as "scary, weird, creepy and disturbing" (Anomalies-Unlimited 2006), and in the case of Anomalies Unlimited and the Vigilant Citizen, the observation of the "scary" imagery in these murals becomes the crux of the argument concerning their sinister intent. The imagery of violence and destruction in these

murals is, to these audiences, so out of place in an airport to warrant suspicion. However, it is part of Tanguma's identity as an artist to present disturbing "pictorial admonishments" as political statements about injustice in the world. He identifies his work as openly political, associated with the Chicano movement, and influenced by radical Mexican muralists like Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros (Tanguma 2011).

While Tanguma's work aims to evoke revolutionary change in the world, rather than global genocide or apocalypse, the idea of revolutionary change is used by conspiracy theorists to explain the political goal of the New World Order, and is fundamental component of the religious millennialist beliefs that Wojcik discusses in *The End of the World as We Know It*. For example, the leaders of many groups of end-times believers, Wojcik says, have been revolutionaries and have opposed the government. He cites founder of the Jehovah's Witnesses, Taze Russel, on his statement that "The second coming of Christ would be completed only after the prophesized destruction of nations, governments, churches and world leaders, all of which he considered to represent Satan's rule" (Wojcik 27, 1999). Revolution, not apocalypse, is the future that Tanguma paints, and it does not represent an "end of the world" as conspiracy theorists claim, but certainly an "end of the world as we know it," where war, violence, and disrespect for nature are abolished.

Superconspiracies like the Denver International Airport conspiracy, which take shape online in Web 2.0, where "everything is connected" (Barkun 2006), become not necessarily widespread beliefs among Web 2.0 users, but widespread cultural ideas that reflect anxieties of digital culture. They concern the loss of privacy and increase of surveillance and control from unseen sources that result from increased connectedness with digital technology. In *The End of the World as We Know It*, Wojcik discusses post-World War II secular apocalyptic themes and

the pervasiveness of content surrounding a nuclear apocalypse in popular culture. Nuclear apocalyptic themes, unlike religious ones, fatalistically emphasized an unredemptive end, where humanity falls victim to its own devices of technology (Wojcik 1999). He specifically links popular conception of the end of the world to “ambivalence about new technologies” and “feelings of individual helplessness” as a result of nuclear technology and the technologies of convenience that entered the homes of everyday people in the 1950s (Wojcik 102, 1999). At this time, growing fears of a “push-button apocalypse,” in which world leaders could activate global nuclear annihilation by simply pushing a button, were grounded in the reality of existing nuclear technology in combination with “the push-button efficiency of dishwashers, television sets, washing machines, and vacuum cleaners that simplified life and provided entertainment” (Wojcik 103, 1999) in their users’ everyday lives..

The mass of unseen connections that make up superconspiracies, like the secular nuclear themes and fear of a “push-button apocalypse” that Wojcik describes in the nuclear era, represent correlation between the form of the pending apocalypse and ambivalence to new technology of the era. The impending worldwide genocide purported in the Denver International Airport Conspiracy can be considered an apocalyptic belief, even though 500 million people are supposed to survive, because the authors of these conspiracy ideas, like Anomalies-Unlimited and the Vigilant Citizen, do not position themselves or their readers as potentially part of the 500 million who will survive. If they were part of this group, the conspiracy would not need to be revealed to them, and they would represent part of the unseen elite behind the genocide. The digital technologies that define Web 2.0, like push-button conveniences in America the 1950s, are met with growing ambivalence about the amount of control users are subject to from unseen sources, just as push-button conveniences were met with a feeling of helplessness against nuclear

technology so developed that it could end human existence with the push of a button. The ease of operation of technology becomes part of the ambivalence and feelings of helplessness related to push-button appliances in the 1950s and connectedness in Web 2.0. After all, Google is marketing the changes to its privacy policy as a move to “simplify” users’ experience, making it “easier” to stay connected across sites, which also means it is easier for them to track users’ activity on and offline. Technology itself represents growing increases in convenience and the “simplification” of users’ experiences, while secular apocalyptic ideas show users growing anxious with this technology, fearing technological progress as a step closer to the end. Leo Tanguma describes this anxiety precisely in his description of “In Peace with Harmony and Nature” when he says “our own humanity [are] victims of our self-destruction” (Tanguma 2011).

“The end,” can mean different things, from the total annihilation of humanity by nuclear apocalypse, to a global genocide guided by the radical politics of the New World order, to literally any revolution that changes things so completely that they will never be the same. In this way, “apocalypse” becomes synonymous with ‘singularity,’ “an event which changes things so fundamentally that there is absolutely no going back,” a phrase which Mark Prensky used to describe the arrival of the digital technology of Web 2.0. (Prensky 1, 2001), or rather an “end of the world as we know it.” Since this article was written in 2001, this digital technology has changed greatly, moving more and more toward the ease of connectedness that sites like Facebook and Google provide in Web 2.0, and the loss of privacy and issues of surveillance that go along with it.

The anxieties of the surveillance involved in digital technology are significant, but they do not typically predict mass destruction on par with global genocide. However, the “singularity” of Web 2.0 differs from the revolutionary unification and peace that Tanguma claims to depict in

his murals because for many it means change for the worse. While opportunities to share content in Web 2.0 and to have content tailored to one's interests appear to be benefits, users are made more aware and uneasy than ever of the privacy implications of tracking in Web 2.0 with Google's new privacy policy. Google's decision to connect user's information across the range of sites that Google owns, and to stop allowing users "opt out" of having their web histories tracked epitomize the activities that increase connectedness and transparency, but anxieties about Google and private information have existed since long before the announcement of the new policy in 2012.

In 2008, European director of TED conferences, Bruno Giussani, wrote the fictional short story "Die Google Apokalypse [the Google Apocalypse]." In "Die Google Apokalypse," Google releases all of the information stored about its users, from the documents they back up on the Google server, to their e-mail, chat and GoogleTalk conversations. This sudden, mass exposure puts individuals and nations at risk as their personal secrets are revealed, creating chaos worthy of being called an "apocalypse." This apocalypse is, to use Danah Boyd's terminology, a public outing of Google users and the unwanted imposition of transparency. In this scenario, unlike the genocide by the N.W.O. predicted in the Denver International Airport Conspiracy, the organization in control (Google), does not annihilate humanity, but gives people the tools to self-destruction (Giussani 2005, 2008). This puts the apocalypse more in line with Leo Tanguma's view of the world, where "our own humanity [are] victims of our self-destruction" (Tanguma 2011). "Leaks" of secret information held by Google are these tools of destruction and Giussani says, "because of Google's centrality to the way hundreds of millions of people use the Internet, it is enough to subvert the world as we know it" (Giussani 2005).

While Giussani presents a fictional scenario in which the information Google stores about its users gives society the tools to self-destruct, the Denver International Airport Conspiracy predicts (most of) humanity will end helplessly at the hands of an unseen, omnipotent organization. In both scenarios, masses of people are ruined by a powerful group demonstrating its complete control over them. However, while the victims of the New World Order genocide in the DIA conspiracy are more or less helpless to this attack, the users in “The Google Apocalypse” could have prevented their ruin, had they not stored personal information on Google. In this way, Giussani’s story is a cautionary tale, like stories about doocing, warning web users not to trust sites like Google with their personal information.

It may seem that the Denver International Airport conspiracy is not a cautionary tale like “The Google Apocalypse,” because it does not present an alternative to destruction. However, as a superconspiracy, the DIA conspiracy involves multiple conspiracies and engages a wide set of values held by conspiracy theorists, which propagate one essential warning: that authorities are not to be trusted. An examination of the wider discourse surrounding the New World Order reveals that while the DIA conspiracy’s climax is the global genocide, the goals of the New World Order include: “World Government, World Religion, World Army, World Central Bank, World Currency and a micro-chipped population” (Smith 2012). While some sources claim these factors to be signs of the Christian end-times (Smith 2012), the specific plot of global genocide in the DIA conspiracy is not implicated in all New World Order theories, and in many cases genocide and apocalypse are substituted for a different total loss of control, referred to as an “Orwellian Police State” (Smith 2012). In this police state the New World Order will not only have global control over government, religion, and commerce, it will also track and police individuals using mandatory tracking devices. While the DIA conspiracy

involves genocide, most conceptions of the New World Order, and most conspiracy theories for that matter, fear the establishment of a police state, in which one elite group has complete surveillance and therefore complete control of the world's population.

The tracking of individuals that conspiracy theorists fear as part of a police state in many ways resembles the extraction of user's by sites like Google and Facebook, and it is not only conspiracy theorists noticing this connection. Regarding the user's information that he collects, Forbes' profile of Facebook creator Mark Zuckerberg said in November 2011, "What the CIA failed to do in 60 years, [he] has done in 7" (Forbes 2011), directly relating the extraction of personal data from Facebook to governmental surveillance. As users of sites like Facebook and Google become increasingly suspicious of how their personal information is collected and used, they share conspiracy theorists' anxiety of being "tracked," or surveilled, and as these sites push towards radical transparency of users, they exhibit the control of individuals that the New World Order represents. The Vigilant Citizen, in their post explaining how "the police state...is not an abstract, theoretical concept. It is real and it is happening" copies an article written in 2010 by an anonymous author on the Activist Post called "10 Ways We Are Being Tracked, Traced, and Databased" (Vigilant Citizen 2010), (Activist Post 2010). This article mentions GPS, RFID (Radio Frequency Identification Devices), cameras in personal computers, traffic cameras, DNA tracking, Internet history, and facial recognition software among the many ways that "[People in] high-tech, first-world countries are being tracked, traced, and databased, literally around every corner" (Activist Post 2010). Conspiracy theorists consider a range of ways they are surveilled on and offline, while Web 2.0 users harbor growing ambivalence towards the way their activities on and offline are tracked by the content they post and the content they access online. "Tracking" is the agent of transparency and comes to represent the antithesis of anonymity. To

be surveilled by an unseen entity, whether it is a governmental New World Order, or a corporation like Google, is to be under the supervision and control of a power that is essentially anonymous.

Since conspiracy theorists and ambivalent Web 2.0 users share anxiety that certain unseen powers can track their activity and threaten their freedom, they both produce online content warning the distrust of these powers. “The Google Apocalypse,” for example, serves as a cautionary tale reflecting and enforcing users’ growing distrust of sites like Google, while conspiracy theories caution towards distrust of the authority in general, specifically the media. While Web 2.0 users are warned to be careful who they trust with their personal information, conspiracy theory participants are encouraged to “be vigilant” (Vigilant Citizen 2010), or not to trust the information that is given to them by the media. While distrust of the media that conceals the Denver Airport Conspiracy does not systematically prevent the genocide or the New World Order, the narrative of this theory, and others on the Vigilant Citizen website, imply that complacency and ignorance are the conspiracies’ tools for control, and that people need to be vigilant in observing the world around them to avoid manipulation. Advertising is viewed by theorists like the Vigilant Citizen as a form of this manipulation by the media, or as they call it, “mind control” (The Vigilant Citizen 2009). Advertising similarly concerns Web 2.0 users as they become suspicious of contextual advertising and fear that they are being used by the media.

Web 2.0 users and contemporary conspiracy theorists share in their ambivalence about technology and surveillance, and in their fear that the Internet, which seemed at first to promote personal expression and free thought, could become a force of tracking, control, and repression. While the move towards user-generated content in Web 2.0 seemed to present opportunities for users to easily share and control their own content and social spheres, users are now feeling a

total loss of control of how their information is accessed and distributed, and similarly while the Web proves an ideal format for conspiracy theorists to distribute their theories anonymously and access more information, it has simultaneously become the place where they are most vulnerable to surveillance.

In “Global Networks and the Effects on Culture,” Alexander Galloway describes “the current global crisis” as one “between centralized, hierarchical powers and distributed, horizontal networks.” Users, whether they are conspiracy theorists, social network users, bloggers, or any combination of these, connect in distributed networks of this sort, which Galloway says are “in a different shape” than hierarchical powers and are impervious to attacks from centralized powers because “destroying one part of the network does not affect the viability of the whole” (Galloway 2005). However, Galloway warns in this article, written in 2005, that “the powers that be have finally come to understand networks too, and what was previously liberating about networks may well not be liberating in the future” (Galloway 2005). This prediction has been at least in part fulfilled, as users express their ambivalence about how sites like Facebook and Google control their information in the once-liberating social web. These sites, which dominate users’ activities on the web, have in their omnipresence become centralized hierarchies in control of networked users, who feel less liberated than violated by enforced transparency. The narratives expressed in superconspiracy theories epitomize Galloway’s prediction, featuring networks of hierarchies seeking complete control of a population.

The present reality of Web 2.0 gives users reason for distress, as powerful entities begin to manipulate networks and gain control over users. Whether it is for financial gain through contextual advertising, or for the enforcement of personal ideologies, like Mark Zuckerberg’s belief in radical transparency, “the powers that be” (Galloway 2005) are gaining control over

Web users' freedom. As these users' are affected by surveillance and control, they not only share anxieties with conspiracy theorists, who fear surveillance and control by covert networks of powerful entities, but also with what Michael Barkun defines as the "principles of any conspiracy theory," or the belief that:

1. Nothing happens by accident
2. Nothing is as it seems
3. Everything is connected (Barkun 4, 2006).

When Heather Armstrong writes about being dooced, she warns readers to "BE YE NOT SO STUPID" (Armstrong 2012), or rather that her doocing did not happen by accident and that one should expect that sort of surveillance. The phrase "nothing is how it seems" can represent the forces who are ultimately in control of online content: be it Google, Facebook or the New World Order. Most of all, the statement "everything is connected" represents both the project of Web 2.0, to foster connectedness, and the vulnerability it creates for users. When Barkun describes the conspiracy theorist's way of thinking, he says they "must engage in a constant process of linkage and correlation in order to map the hidden connections" (Barkun 4, 2006). This description also precisely describes the process through which a person engaging in the discourse about a conspiracy, or about anything else online communicates: through constant linkage to other sites and tagging related content to map the connections between sources of information. Therefore, the Internet as a whole operates under the same logic that Barkun ascribes to conspiracy theorists.

Media theorists focusing on technoculture would explain this correlation with the idea that the form of the Internet in fact shapes the form of superconspiracies, and of all Web 2.0 users' expressions of ambivalence to the medium. Steven Johnson describes how the interface, or

“the software that shapes the interaction between the user and computer...transforms the way we create and communicate” (Johnson 14, 2004). Similarly Ganaele Langlois explains how “the technical layers [of the interface] are not simply the tools that allow for the interactivity among human actors, but become the silent actor with which human actors have to dialogue” (Langlois 103, 2008). This technocultural perspective further explains the growth of superconspiracies on Web 2.0, as their form is in some ways shaped by the content creators’ interaction with the Web 2.0 interface, as well as it further explains the similarities between everyday Web 2.0 users’ and conspiracy theorists’ expressions of anxiety, as they are both shaped by interaction with the same interface.

In the present moment of the digital age, users find themselves doubting the freedom of content-creation that Web 2.0 initially promised, as personal expression online is directly linked to surveillance, and as the policies of dominating sites like Google and Facebook enforce transparency without consent. Whether for financial gain or for the enforcement of ideologies, these powerful forces online followed Galloway’s prediction and learned to manipulate networks of users, at the expense of these users’ freedom. At this same moment, narratives describing superconspiracies like the Denver International Airport Conspiracy circulate online, reaching a mass audience and constantly growing to include new components. The themes of these superconspiracies represent the epitome of the concerns of web users, as hierarchies in control are elusively networked to violate the privacy, freedom, and safety of individuals. In this way, superconspiracy narratives are shaped by the form of the Web 2.0 interface itself, and provide a magnified mirror of the issues of surveillance and control that presently weigh on all Web 2.0 users.

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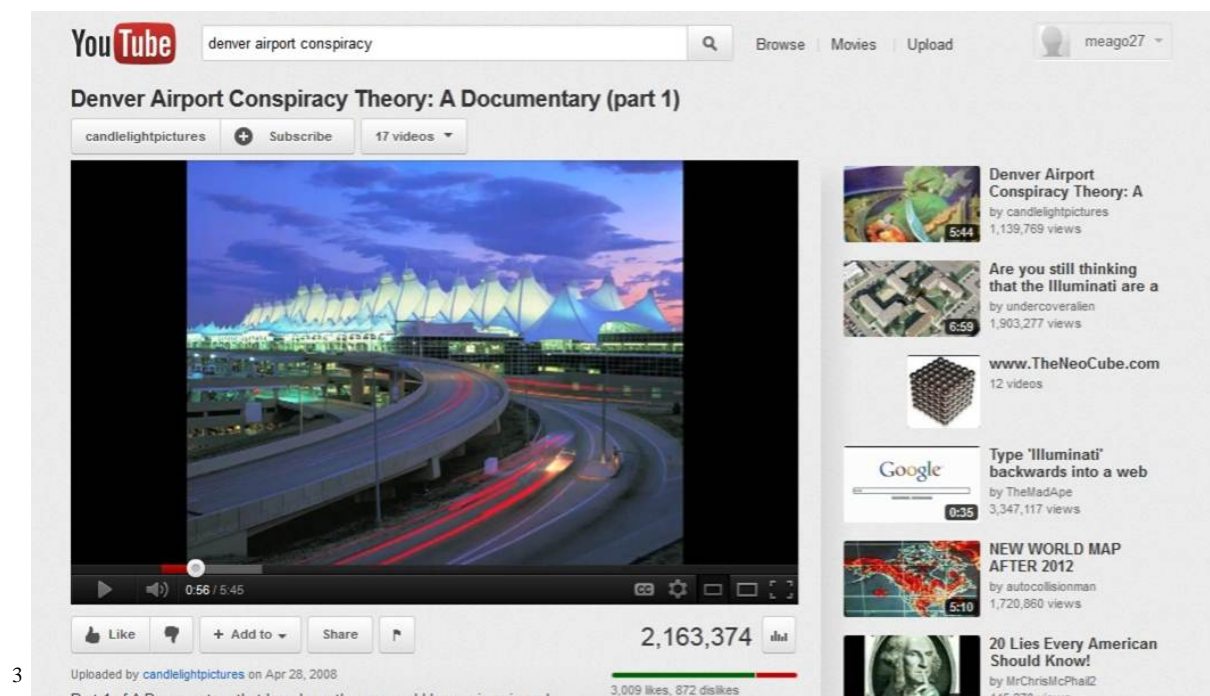
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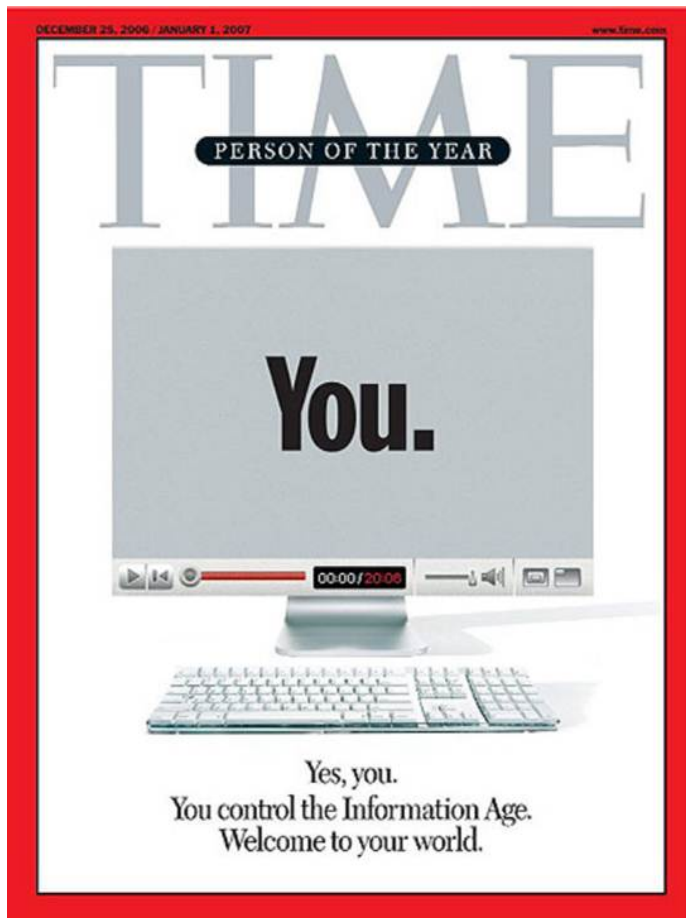


2

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4

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5



keep getting ads for jdate on facebook... i'm kinda thinking that fb looks at your pictures, especially after that ad for wes anderson art when i had the bill murray profile pic... if they would just look at my profile under my religious beliefs, they'd see that i believe "we're all just snakes on a plane"

Like · Comment · Share · about an hour ago ·

2 people like this.

Collected from Facebook in November 2011. Faces and names in Facebook status have been removed.



6

Graphic of the Facebook logo fused with an “all-seeing eye” on the PC World Blog. Retrieved January 8, 2012 from:

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7

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8

1. dooce

404 up, 40 down



To be fired from you job because of the contents of your weblog.

Dude, did you hear what happen to Mary, she got dooced.

buy dooce mugs & shirts

by Marz Nov 17, 2004 share this add a video

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11

This conversation was collected February 23, 2012 from Facebook.


Showing 9 comments Sort by popular nc ▾

 **Hoodie**

It begins....

Big Brother is watching. Always watching.

1 month ago 4 Likes Like Reply

 **Furrama**

Eh, they already know everything about me and my habits, and they can see my home from space.

Google is my dear and glorious leader. Google is my dear and glorious leader.

1 month ago 1 Like Like Reply

disqus.com

Collected from the comment sections of the Daily What's post, "Google Privacy Precaution of the Day" on March 10, 2012.



13

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